

WOMEN'S EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Savitribai Phule, the first female teacher of the first women's school in India is a pioneer figure. She relentlessly fought against the dominant caste system and worked towards the upliftment of the marginalized. She demanded dignity for all women, for which she, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule worked their entire lives. The principles of humanity, equality, liberty and justice were of utmost importance to her. During a time when women were mere objects, she ignited a spark that led to equality in education, which was impossible before. She strongly spoke against the discriminatory boundaries imposed on women, which led to their oppression. Her emphasis on secular education for social emancipation in India is the marker of her significant personality. By getting to know her better, by understanding her struggles and hardships, we will be looking into a life that not only changed the face of education in India, but also enlightened humanity in its real essence.

KEYWORDS: Women Education, Savitribai Phule, First Female Teacher of India

Article History

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INTRODUCTION

EARLY LIFE AND WORK

Savitribai Jyotirao Phule was born on January 3, 1831 at Naigaon, about 50 km from Pune. She was the eldest daughter of mother Lakshmi and father Khandoji Neveshe Patil. In 1840, at the age of 10, she was married to Jyotirao, who was 13 at the time. After marriage Savitribai and Jotiba lived in a Dalit-working class locality in Pune. Jyotirao educated his wife at home and trained her to become a teacher. The responsibility of Savitribai's further education was taken up by Jyotirao's friends Sakharam Yeshwant Paranjpe and Keshgav Shivram Bhavalkar (Joshi). Savitribai also had taken teacher's training at Ms. Farar's institute in Ahmednagar and in the Normal School of Ms. Mitchell in Pune. Savitribai went on to become India's first woman teacher and headmistress. It is her struggle and story that marks the beginning of modern Indian women's public life in India. The extraordinary couple was engaged in a passionate struggle to build a movement for equality between men and women and a fight against the caste system. They dedicated their lives to spreading education and knowledge. They started the first school in the country for girls and the 'Native Library'. In 1863, they started a 'home for the prevention of infanticide' in their own house, to ensure the safety of pregnant and exploited widows. They also established the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society for Truth Seeking), initiating the practice of marriage without dowry or overt expenses. They were against child

marriage and supported widow remarriages. They had no children of their own but adopted a child of a Brahmin widow, educating him and arranging an inter-caste marriage for him.

Savitribai Phule and Jyotirao Phule Savitribai and Jotiba built a revolutionary social education movement for shudra and atishudra women of the country. After starting the school in 1848 and training Savitribai Phule, Jotiba started a school for the Mahars and the Mangs. But within six months, his father threw them out of the house and the school work came to an abrupt halt. Govande came to Pune and took Savitribai with him to Ahmednagar. After she came back, Keshav Shivram Bhavalkar took up the responsibility of educating her. Jyotirao and Savitribai focused on providing girls and boys vocational and practical education, to make them capable of independent thought. They believed that an industrial department should be attached to the schools where children could learn useful trades and crafts and be able to manage their lives comfortably and independently. They insisted that ‘education should give one the ability to choose between right and wrong and between truth and untruth in life.’ They took special efforts to create spaces where the creativity of boys and girls could bloom. Their success is evident from the fact that young girls loved to study under their guidance, so much so that their parents would complain of the girls’ dedication to studies. Students who lived in the hostel run by Jyotirao and Savitribai had the following to say about her. Laxman Karadi Jaaya from Mumbai said, “I have not seen another woman as kind and loving as Savitribai. She gave us more love than even a mother could.” Another student Mahadu Sahadu Waghole wrote, “Savitribai was very generous, and her heart was full of kindness. She would be very compassionate to the poor and the needy. She would constantly give the gift of food; she would offer everyone meals. If she saw tattered clothes on the body of poor women, she would give them saris from her own house. Due to this, their expenses rose. Tatya (Jyotirao) would sometimes say to her, ‘One should not spend so much.’ To this, she would smile and ask ‘What do we have to take with us when we die?’ Tatya would sit quietly for some time after this as he had no response to the question. They loved each other immensely.”

Savitribai’s struggle was fraught with many difficulties and despite that she continued her work peacefully. Men would purposely wait in the streets and pass lewd remarks. They sometimes pelted stones and threw cow dung or mud. Savitribai would carry two saris when she went to school, changing out of the soiled sari once she reached school, which would again be soiled on her way back, and yet, she did not give up. The guard who was then appointed for her, wrote in his memoirs about what she would say to those men, “As I do the sacred task of teaching my fellow sisters, the stones or cow dung that you throw seem like flowers to me. May God bless you!” In July 1887, when Jyotirao paralysed his right side due to a heart attack, Savitribai nursed him night and day because of which he managed to recover and write again. During the same time, their financial crisis was at its peak. A political sage and well-wisher Mama Paramanand tried hard to get them financial help. In a letter to the King of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad, Paramanand recorded the historic work that the couple was engaged in and said the following about Savitribai, “More than Jyotirao, his wife deserves praise. No matter how much we praise her, it would not be enough. How can one describe her stature? She cooperated with her husband completely and along with him, faced all the trials and tribulations that came their way. It is difficult to find such a sacrificing woman even among the highly educated women from upper castes. The couple has spent their entire life working for people.”

When Jyotirao passed away, Savitribai was present there. Due to the lack of permission from municipality, he could not be buried with salt covering his body as he had wished. He was burnt on the pyre and it was Savitribai who courageously came forward and held the earthen pot (it is supposed to be carried by the successor of the deceased). She led the final journey of Jyotirao and consigned his body to the flames. In the history of India, this was probably the first time a

woman had performed death rites. She also erected a 'Tulsi Vrindavan' with his ashes on the spot where Jyotirao wanted to be buried. After Jyotirao's demise, Savitribai led the Satyashodhak movement till the very end. She was the chairperson of the Satyashodhak Conference held in 1893 at Saswad, Pune.

The year 1897 dawned with the menace of plague. People were dying in hundreds daily in Pune. The government tried to control the epidemic under the leadership of officer Rand. Savitribai along with Yeshwant set up a hospital to take care of the patients. She would herself pick up sick people and bring them to the hospital and treat them. Even though she knew that the disease was contagious, she continued to serve them till the plague took her own life. As soon as she came to know that the son of Pandurang Babaji Gaekwad in the Mahar settlement outside the village of Mundhwa was afflicted with plague, she went there and rushed back to the hospital with the sick child on her back. She caught the disease in this process and at 9 pm on March 10, 1897, she passed away. Savitribai, along with Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, fought for the rights of women, peasants, Dalits and backward castes. Both of them bravely faced the abuses hurled at them by reactionary and casteist dominant forces. They carried on their struggle for gender equality and fight against caste system in spite of tremendous maltreatment by the Manuwadi and Brahminic forces.

Savitribai fought against the totalitarianism of the caste system and other social evils till her last moments. She was a strong voice for gender equality. It is because of the strength and vigour she had that at a time when people from certain sections of the society were seen as untouchables, she gave them shelter in her home and took care of them. She challenged the Brahmin hegemony and fractured their dominance through her enduring and heroic struggle for women's and marginalised people's rights. She overcame and survived everyday harassment and oppression and dared to learn and teach other women. Our academia and nation both have done great disservice to her contribution and struggles for the upliftment of the disregarded by erasing her life-story from our history books, nationalist mainstream discourse and our memory. The total erasure of her struggle against the caste system, Brahminism, patriarchy and discrimination and exclusion of the untouchables is a testimony of nothing but our nation's brutality and a stain on the upper caste Brahmin-dominated knowledge production system of India.

Savitribai Phule's poems and other writings continue to be an inspiration for many and remain pioneering in the struggle against India's caste system. She has put together some very valuable writing.

- Kavyaphule- Collection of poems, 1854
- Jyotirao's Speeches, Edited by Savitribai Phule, 25 December 1856
- Savitribai's Letters to Jyotirao
- Speeches of MatoshreeSavitribai, 1892
- BavankashiSubodhRatnakar, 1892

These works have been collected together in a 194-page volume 'The Complete Works of Savitribai Phule' edited by Dr M. G. Mali. The volume has an introduction by the famous thinker and philosopher Dr.Surendra Barlinge. 'Kavyaphule', published in 1854, was the first anthology of Savitribai's poems. It has a total of 41 poems on the themes such as nature, social issues, instructive poems and historical poems. 'Jyotirao's Speeches' is a volume edited by Savitribai and the transcription has been done by Charles Joshi. This book was published in 1856 and contains four speeches by Jyotirao. 'Savitribai's Letters to Jyotirao' has a total of three letters written from Otur and Naigaon. 'Speeches of

Matoshree Savitribai' contains Savitribai's speeches on varied topics such as enterprise, imparting education, good conduct, addictions and loans, among others. They have been edited by Shastri Naro Babaji Mahadhat Pansare Patil and were published by Vatsal Press, Baroda in 1892. 'Bavankashi Subodh Ratnakar' is collection of poems that narrates the history of India, including Jyotirao's work in prose. It has 52 compositions. This poetry was composed in 1891 after Jyotirao's death and published as a book in 1892. The support, cooperation and companionship that Savitribai gave Jyotirao throughout his life is extraordinary. The ideal of equality between men and women and peaceful companionship that they have set, transcends the limits of time and space. The path-breaking work that they did in the fields of education, social justice, eradication of caste and the eradication of priestly power illuminates not only the past but also the present. It is a contribution without parallels even in the present times. This legacy of Savitribai will continue to enrich our lives forever.

Since 1962, 5th September in India is observed as Teachers day in India. The significance of this day, as we all have been taught in schools, is that it is the birth anniversary of independent India's first vice president and second president, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975). In our popular knowledge, the stereotypical understanding of educators, teachers and gurus is restricted and limited to upper caste Brahmin men like Radhakrishnan, Dronacharya, and Manu – to name a few. These and many other 'meritorious' men have shaped our history, which not only excludes the lower castes and bahunas from its discourse, but also reinforces that the right to education and especially the right to teach remains within the ambit of the 'born meritorious' upper castes. To counter to this, a section of people have been raising their voice against this mainstream culture of commemoration by challenging and rejecting the celebration of Teachers' Day on this day. They instead, are celebrating January 3rd, the birth day of Savitribai Phule, as Education Day/National Teachers Day.

For nearly 25 years before Jotirao started his girls' school, Christian missionaries in Maharashtra had been working at taking education to the masses. Jotirao and his friend Govande went to see the girl's school being run by missionaries in the Ahmednagar. Cynthia Farrar, an American lady, was in charge there. Most of the girls studying in the school were from the so-called untouchable and other backward castes. The kunbi (kurmi) and mali girls studying there had gained in confidence. This delightful experience at the school got Jotirao thinking: Miss Ferrar was neither from this country nor a relative of the girls, yet she was trying to provide education to them, while, on the other hand, the Brahmins of Pune were horrified by even the sight of these girls. Jotirao realized that the men and women from lowered castes such as Mahar, Matang, Mang, Pasi, Bhangi and Chamar were burdened with grief and were in darkness. While talking to Jotirao and Shri Govande, Miss Farrar expressed sadness about women being kept out of education. So he took it up upon himself to improve their situation.

On August 1848, in Budhwar Peth, Pune, in the house of Shri Bhide, he opened his first girls' school. On the very first day, nine girls from three different social backgrounds, namely Brahmins, Sethis, and backward castes, joined the school. A letter published in the newspaper *Bombay Guardian*, dated 28 November 1851, talks about this historic moment. Jotirao was 21 years old. At the time, Maharashtra's famous social reformers Shri Gopal Ganesh Agarkar and Maharishi Dhondo Keshav, the pioneers of women's education, were not even born. They were born in 1856 and 1850, respectively. Jotirao told stories to the girls, played games, shared sweets and taught hygiene. It was as if he had become their mother. He used to teach reading and writing, grammar and mathematics. Soon, the number of students increased, but he was the only teacher. He needed help. There was also a lot of opposition to the running of the girls' school. If anyone agreed to teach in the school, he was threatened and beaten, and had to endure boycott in the neighbourhood. Thus, no person could dare to teach in Jotirao's school. Jotirao had started to teach his wife Savitribai after visiting the missionary girls' school in Ahmednagar. When Savitribai had learnt enough, Jotirao offered her the role of a teacher. Savitribai accepted this proposal

with pleasure. And when Savitribai shared Jotirao's burden of educating women, she became the first female teacher of modern India. However, this did not go down well with the Hindu fundamentalists. They were angered by the news that a school had been opened for the Untouchables and started a campaign to defame Jotirao. They accused him of being hell-bent on "drowning" the Hindu religion. They said he was going to become a Christian himself and would convert his students to Christianity. However, all these attacks could not deter Jotirao and Savitribai from providing education to the underprivileged.

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